

16 The Theatre



groundling playwright prop
gallery pit



There was no television or cinema in Tudor times. People usually made their own entertainment. But there were some entertainers who performed for a living. There were acrobats and men with puppet-shows. Above all, there were actors.

In early Tudor times, players began to use inn-yards for their plays. A platform was put up and people stood in front or watched from the galleries.

Plays soon became so popular that theatres were specially built for them. The most famous was The Globe in London. The best-known playwright of the time, William Shakespeare, put on his plays there.

Like all theatres of the time, it was built outside the city walls. The Council of London was worried that theatre crowds might help to spread the plague.

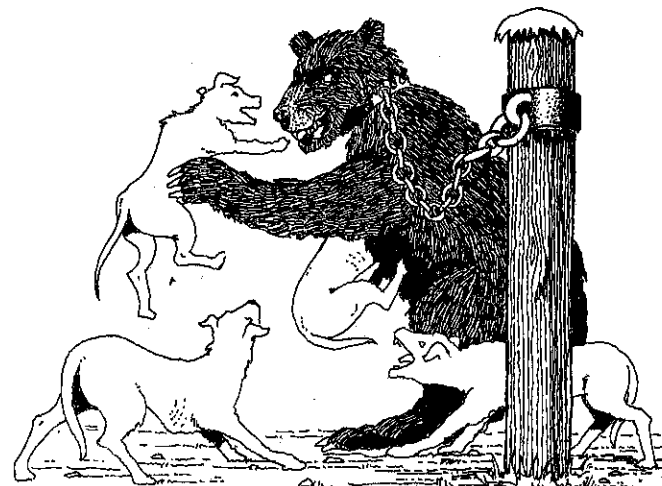
An Elizabethan theatre was very different to a modern theatre. It was round and had no roof. Plays were put on in the afternoon, when the weather was fine. A flag was flown or a cannon fired so that people knew a play was on.

The stage jutted out across the yard or pit. It cost the **groundlings** just 1/2p to stand there and watch. A seat in the gallery cost 1p. Theatres were noisy places because people walked about and talked while the play was going on. They could buy fruit and nuts, or wine and beer.

There was no curtain to shut off the stage, but actors could suddenly appear through a trap-door or from a door at the back of the stage.

There was hardly any scenery, either. The audience just had to imagine the scene. This caused problems for a playwright. He had to make sure that his actors told the audience where they were and what time of day it was. If they didn't, the audience wouldn't understand what was going on!

The actors were all men or boys. Only later, in the 17th century, did women start to act. However, the actors did wear special clothes for their parts and they had all kinds of **props**. In a murder scene, the audience expected the actors to make it look real by using pigs' blood and animals' guts!



Bear-baiting was one of the violent entertainments at this time. The theatre 'pit' was named after the pits where bear-baiting took place.



B A Puritan minister objected to theatres in this sermon, preached in 1578:

Look upon the common plays in London, and see the multitude [crowd] that flocketh to them and followeth them. But I understand they are now forbidden because of the plague. I like the policy well if it hold still, for the cause of plagues is sin, and the cause of sin are plays. Therefore, the cause of plagues are plays.

C The Lord Mayor and Aldermen complained about theatres in this letter of 1597:

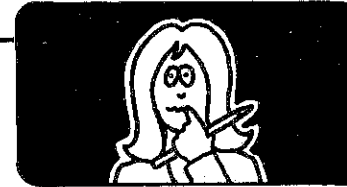
They are the ordinary places for vagrants, thieves, coney-catchers and other idle and dangerous persons to meet together, to the great displeasure of Almighty God and the hurt and annoyance of her Majesty's people.

They maintain idleness in persons who have no vocation [job], and draw apprentices and other servants from their ordinary work and all sorts of people away from sermons and other Christian exercises.

In time of sickness many walk abroad and amuse themselves by hearing a play, whereby others are infected.



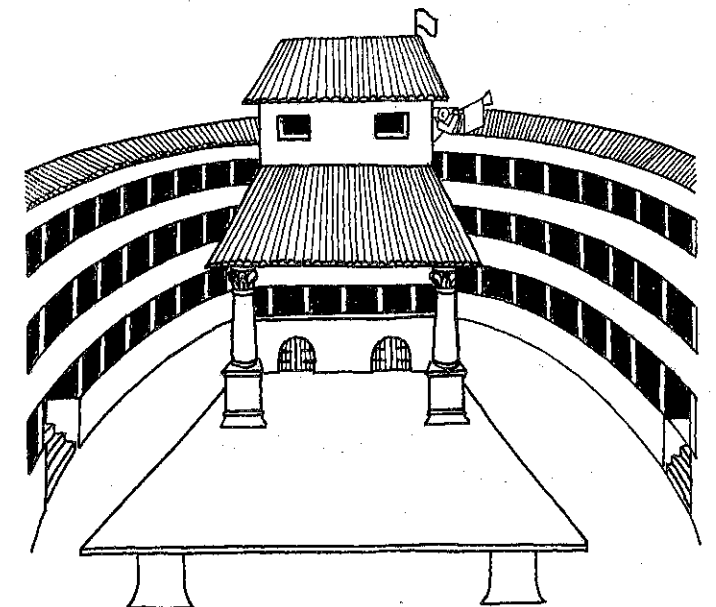
A The Swan Theatre. This drawing was made in 1596.



- Match up the words in list A with their meanings from list B.

list A	list B
playwright	object used by an actor
prop	a person who writes plays
pit	a person watching the play from the pit

- Copy the outline drawing of the Swan Theatre (shown on the right). On it, mark the following: the pit; the galleries; the stage; flag; the trumpeter.
- Read evidence B and C.
 - What do these writers say are caused by plays?
 - Do you think writer B is right? Give reasons for your answer.
- Write a conversation between two Tudor people. One thinks plays are a nuisance but the other disagrees. Use evidence B and C to give you ideas.
- Draw an Elizabethan theatre of your own – one that looks better than the Swan Theatre!



Remember:

- it must be open air (for light)
 - it will need seats and audience space
 - it will need a stage and dressing-rooms
 - you need at least one door on to the stage
- When you have drawn it, you could make a model of it.